TL5888

TIMORESE PERSPECTIVES ON COLONIALISM AND DECOLONIZATION

Presented at the SSRC Workshop on East Timor
Washington, D.C.
April 25, 1991

Elizabeth G. Traube
Wesleyan University

Contemporary anthropologists who attribute an active role in history to culture also reject the view of cultural influence as inherently conservative in its effects. Culture, it is argued, is involved in the transformation as well as the reproduction of social systems over time. Recent historical studies by anthropologists have investigated specific cultural forms - categories, symbols, narrative patterns, and so on- that mediate local interpretations of new circumstances in complex ways, shaping a variety of posssible responses. The openness and indeterminacy of culturally mediated historical processes reflects properties of cultural forms themselves and the dynamics of their social use.

Thus, on the one hand, the content of cultural forms may justify critiques of or departures from established practices. For example, Valerio Valeri argues, many societies represent their past as a complex process that provides arguments for change as well as for changelessness (1990: 155). And from a somewhat different perspective, James Scott (1985) points out that inasmuch as any legitimizing ideology idealizes the dominant order, it inevitably provides its members with the symbolic means for an internal critique.

If a cultural repertoire has a certain inbuilt dynamism, the possibilities for meaningful social action multiply from a

sociological perspective. Within a society, actors' interpretations of shared cultural forms tend to vary according to social position, producing divergent but mutually intelligible versions of reality. Sherry Ortner (1990) suggests that the very distance between actors' selves and particular cultural forms is shifting and variable. Certain people, at certain times, may internalize a given cultural "schema" (Ortner's term for relatively generalized and transferable symbolic patterns) and use it in constructing their current situations, whereas for others, or at other times, that schema remains external to the self, perhaps apprehended as an abstract model of ancestral deeds, but not as a structural dimension of ongoing, lived reality. With these analytical insights as a background, I will try to give some idea in this paper of the complexity of the responses of one East Timorese people to the prospects for their political future, as these appeared to them in 1974.

At that time I was in the second year of ethnographic research among a group known as the Mambai. They are an Austronesian-speaking ethnic group who then numbered over 80,000, and they inhabit the mountainous interior of central Timor. The Mambai economy is based on shifting cultivation and animal husbandry. Maize is the staple crop, and Mambai also cultivate dry rice (an important ceremonial food), as well as taro, yams, sweet potatoes, cassava, millet, pigeon peas, and beans. Coffee, introduced by the Portuguese in the late nineteenth century, was the most important cash crop during the colonial period. It was raised by individual families and sold in order to purchase basic

commodities such as clothing, school supplies, kerosene, and to pay the annual colonial head tax.

Mambai social life is shaped at multiple levels by ideas of unity and division. Individuals belong to male-ordered units known as "houses," fada, a term that designates both a group and its dwelling. The socially significant dwelling is not an everyday residence but a named ancestral origin house where the group's sacred heirlooms are stored. House members or "people of one house" are scattered for most of the year, living in what Mambai represent as the "outer" realm of space, but they reconvene at their origin houses on ritual occasions and reenact their mythical unity.

A conceptual premise of the house system is that all houses are ultimately derived from a single primordial origin house on the top of the sacred mountain, at the center of the cosmos, where Mother Earth and Father Heaven are said to have brought forth the first ancestors of humankind. In this mythology of common origins, human history entails a process of separation and division that begins with the dispersal of the ancestors from the cosmic mountain and continues down to the present. Narratives of house formation describe how houses are divided and subdivided by restless, mobile men. In these narratives elder brothers invariantly remain behind at the paternal origin house, while their younger brothers "go off to the outside," after having "cut a slip" from the paternal house pillar to "plant" as the foundation for new houses of their own. Repeated over generations, the centrifugal movements of younger brothers create

what Mambai represent as an ever ramifying array of junior "tip houses," centered by the senior "trunk houses" of common ancestors. In the ideology of the house system, "tip houses" are ritually dependent on their acknowledged "trunk" and are expected to participate in its rituals.

Mambai houses are also ranked and organized at a higher level into hierarchically structured communities. Leadership in these communities is diarchic, divided between active political executives, the actual holders of power, and passive ritual authorities, who legitimize the power held by others. Narratives preserved by ritual authorities but widely acknowledged in broad outline recount the origins of the diarchic division. In these narratives, mythical ancestors of the ritual figures are the original founders of order. Once they have established their dominion over outlying house groups, they renounce the power of rule, which is embodied in the regalia of office, swords, spears and Portuguese flags and military drums. Newcomers from outside the realm receive these tokens and are henceforth empowered to regulate human affairs, while the old lords retain ritual authority over the cosmos and stabilize the community from its symbolic center. As Mambai say, "they sit down to look after the rock and to watch over the tree," the ubiquitous icons of cult life on Timor.

Mambai refer to these house-based political communities in Portuguese, as the "ancient kingdoms" (reinu antiku) or "kingdoms of long ago" (reinu akin), and the emphasis on antiquarianism is well-placed. Annual and periodic rituals staged in the centers

still mobilize the communities in their ideal hierarchical form, but to the Portuguese colonial authorities, these were purely "religious" as opposed to "political" activities, and the house organization on which they rested went largely unrecognized by the colonial administration. Following the pacification campaigns executed at the turn of the century, the Portuguese had imposed a uniform system of administration across the province that was based on a nested hierarchy of residential units, village (povoacao), district (suku, Tetum), and kingdom (reino). Mambai preserved their system of hierarchically ranked, decentralized house groups for ritual purposes, but the colonially imposed administrative hierarchy regulated everyday affairs, as well as the collection of the annual head tax.

What Mambai came to regard as their traditional political units are not primordial residues of precolonial political life, but products of an earlier stage in colonial intervention. After moving their capital to Dili in 1789, the hard pressed Portuguese colonizers endeavored to contract alliances with local chiefs by distributing military patents, a policy that was maintained through the nineteenth century. In return for the patents, recipients pledged their loyalty and military support to the Portuguese Crown, and they agreed to deliver tribute in agricultural produce to the Portuguese in Dili. It appears that the colonial authorities had contrived to insert themselves into an older system of exchange relations that had linked native coastal rulers to rulers in the interior. In the precolonial system, the leaders of the mountain peoples were probably

attributed special ritual powers over nature, and they would have received reciprocal gifts for their mystical services from the coastal chiefs.

According to traditions preserved by contemporary Mambai ritual leaders, the "ancient kingdoms" originally united for the accumulation and distribution of harvest gifts. In this version of the past, ritual leaders used to receive harvest tribute from their people and display it in their villages. It was then the task of the active executives to convey the tribute to the Portuguese in Dili and return with counter-prestations of salt, lime, rice and livestock from indigenous chiefs on the coast. These were formally presented to the old lords of rock and tree, those whose ritual influence over agricultural growth had made the entire cycle of transactions possible. To Mambai, these exchanges enacted and confirmed the hierarchical superiority of ritual authorities, and at the time of my research, members of local executive houses were still required to bring symbolic gifts to the old lords on ritual occasions. But the system as a whole no longer operated. In 1903, as part of their attempt to rationalize colonial domination, the Portuguese abolished the tributary arrangements of which they had once availed themselves and substituted the cash head tax. By this act they eliminated what Mambai continue to represent as a legitimate and meaningful exchange system, the true motive for the colonial presence on Timor.

No doubt this type of ideological legitimation of foreign rulers was facilitated by the limited extent of colonial

intervention prior to the twentieth century and by the relatively benign system that was established after pacification. Still, legitimation took a striking cultural form. In the diarchic ideologies that characterize most Timorese political systems, power is assigned to mythic outsiders, strangers who come from overseas or from somewhere outside of the realm and supplant original, autochthonous rulers. What varies from group to group is which of the two categories comes to represent their collective identity, outsider or insider, stranger or autochthone, people of the sea or people of the land, but in either case, it was possible and plausible to identify the Portuguese with the figure of the "stranger king" (Sahlins 1981). Mambai not only made such an identification, but they gave it a distinctive twist.

Their mythology of the origins of colonial rule combines two sets of dual categories, the distinction between elder and younger brothers and the diarchic distinction between ritual and jural rulers. The story, known to Mambai as "the walk of the flag," begins on the cosmic mountain, at the very start of human history, when the first children of Heaven and Earth still dwelt together in one abode. After washing in white water, their youngest son wandered far away, across the water and sea, taking with him all the regalia of political office, the signs of sovereignty that "cause women to tremble and lead men to fear". Left behind on Timor, his black elder brother retained "only the rock and the tree," and he was unable to elicit respect from his realm. Thus the elder brother set off on an epic journey over the

seas to Portugal. There his younger brother restored to him sufficient power tokens to found a realm, and promised that his descendants would one day return to Timor and resume their rightful place as defenders of order. Hence, from the perspective of Mambai ritual leaders, when modern Portuguese rulers abolished the tribute system which revolved around the old lords of rock and tree, they were turning their backs on the very figures whose ancestors had summoned them to Timor.

In the ritual centers the abolition of tribute is remembered with bitterness, but it is not the Portuguese who are held responsible. I was told repeatedly and with considerable fervor that local Mambai chiefs from the executive plane of the diarchy had somehow tricked the Portuguese into instituting the head tax. What motivated the chiefs, according to local rumor, was an abiding but unfounded suspicion that the old lords were plotting to "seize the chieftaincy" and restore the original mythical situation, when power and authority were concentrated in a single function.

Colonial domination, especially in its modern, rationalized forms, has rarely been congenial to sacral authorities. In case after case, traditional rulers who claimed to have mystical influence over nature either fell back on more mundane military and jural prerogatives, if they possessed them, or else retreated before those who did and who thus conformed more closely to European conceptions of sovereignty. Mambai ritual leaders had been in retreat for much of the twentieth century, as Portuguese colonial policies strengthened the jural plane of the diarchic

system. Their pragmatic ability to affect the Portuguese rulers was nil, and their traditional moral influence over native holders of power was slowly eroding, yet they continued to wage an ideological struggle with the latter over the definition of political reality. In April, 1974, when the fall of the Caetano regime abruptly altered the possibilities for Timor's political future, this local ideological struggle conditioned divergent responses to the new situation.

Some Mambai executive leaders initially gravitated toward UDT, the political party calling for eventual federation with Portugal. Most, however, were receptive to FRETILIN's goal of national independence. These FRETILIN supporters did not necessarily reject the mythology of common origins with the Portuguese, nor did they deny that ritual authorities were the original holders and ultimate legitimizers of power. Nevertheless, to use Sherry Ortner's formulation (1990), they kept these schemas at a distance, treating them as models of ancient events, with limited bearing on present political realities. Accustomed by their social position to look forward and outward rather than backward and inward, they became actively involved in the nationalist politics that emanated from the coastal capital.

I witnessed most of this early stage in the debate from the perspective of a ritual center, where the community had convoked for a house-building ceremony. Throughout the lengthy ceremonial event, people met to discuss "this matter," as one old man put it, "of our younger brothers going away." Episodes from the

mythology of rule were repeatedly incorporated into ritual performances and recited or alluded to in ordinary conversations, which grew increasingly heated as events outside unfolded. In short, the hosts as well as many of their guests had internalized the mythic schema and were using it to interpret their current situation.

The most conservative way of deploying myth was to categorically reject the possibility of independence. In this strategy, Portuguese colonial rule was portrayed as natural and necessary, legitimized by kinship and by the primordial division of diarchic functions. "They cannot go," people protested over and over, "for they are our younger brothers. Our ancestors crossed the water and sea to call them back here to rule over us." Many speakers used diarchic symbolism to construct a collective Timorese identity that was incompatible with self-governance. "How can we rule ourselves," they would exclaim rhetorically, "when we are old and ignorant (of worldly things) and know only the rock and the tree!"

In the mythic past, however, Mambai could also find arguments for change. Although usurpation is not a legitimating criterion for succession in Mambai political thought, as it was in ancient Hawaii (Valeri 1990), their narrative representations of succession underscore the transferability of political power. A recurrent pattern in the narratives is for executive rulers to "grow old and weary," at which point they voluntarily "surrender the lordship" to younger, more vigorous claimants. After the first outburst of indignation and alarm, people began

more calmly to discuss how best to deal with the fatigue that had apparently overtaken their Portuguese kinsmen. In these discussions, it was assumed that the Portuguese would depart, and attention was focused on the process whereby a successor might be selected.

In fact, Mambai contemplated their "younger brothers going away" with mixed emotions. Not despite but by means of their ingenious legitimation of colonial rule, Mambai had also developed a distinctive popular culture of resistance. Open defiance of colonial power was rarely attempted, either individually or collectively, and Portuguese officials often remarked on the extreme deference that Mambai showed in their presence. But colonial stereotypes of native submissiveness ignored what James Scott (1985:284-289) calls the hidden transcript, the "backstage" situations in which subordinate groups take off their public masks and criticize the powerful. Outside of colonial power situations, Mambai complained bitterly and forcefully about their Portuguese rulers, without, however, denying the legitimacy of the colonial power structure. On the contrary, they formulated their complaints in terms of the ideal model of colonial rule, which the Portuguese inevitably violated, both individually and collectively.

Portuguese transgressions ranging from rude, arrogant behavior to the abolition of the tribute system coalesced to persuade Mambai of one inescapable fact: their younger kin and rightful rulers had forgotten who had brought them to Timor and for what purpose. A poetic speech that two close informants once

recited for me makes the point compellingly, in the form of a reprimand delivered by a Timorese to his younger Portuguese brother. I quote a few lines:

> Maybe it is the rifle that you carry on your shoulder
> Maybe it is the gun belt that you gird around your waist
> For it is you who is stupid
> It is you who is ignorant.
> We two might converse
> We two might talk together
> But you come with the sharp thing
> You come with the pointed thing
> To chase me like a deer
> To hunt me like a wild pig
> As if I had no words
> As if I had no speech.

In this poem transgressions take their meaning from the order that the poem as a whole reaffirms. By treating kin as if they were non-kin, speaking human beings as if they were speechless animals, subjects as if they were objects, the Portuguese brother demonstrates his limited understanding of reality. And from the all too apparent ignorance that the Portuguese displayed in actual power situations, Mambai derived a sense of moral superiority which is openly articulated in hidden transcripts such as the poem. Unlike Scott, however, I would not characterize public deference as a purely pragmatic, calculated submission to power, although it is partly that. But retrospectively, at least, maintaining a respectful silence in the presence of disrespectful or abusive Portuguese conduct also reinforced the considerable pride that Mambai took in their superior understanding of the contract between rulers and ruled.

When I left Timor at the end of 1974, few Mambai whom I knew showed signs of a revolutionary nationalist consciousness. In

Mambai ritual centers, people rallied around a traditional, backward looking ideology of domination, in defense of the hierarchical values and political arrangements that colonial practice had cumulatively eroded. What was envisioned in this period was more on the lines of a restoration of an idealized represented past than a radical transformation of the existing order. For instance, among the demands most vociferously and somewhat petulantly articulated was that Mambai ritual leaders be consulted to legitimize any new claimants to power; in this respect, many people nurtured a sense of grievance against FRETILIN for what they perceived as the party's disregard for traditional authorities.

Nevertheless, as I have suggested, there were also oppositional elements to the consciousness that prevailed, and as the situation around them changed, Mambai may well have been drawn into increasingly radical forms of action. Under colonial rule, Mambai discontents had multiplied to create a pervasive dissatisfaction. Their quietly maintained sense that things were not as they ought to be would, I believe, have made Mambai receptive to the nationalist promise of a new future. That promise, however, today remains unfulfilled.

Citations

Ortner, Sherry. 1990. "Patterns of History: Cultural Schemas in the Foundings of Sherpa Religious Institutions." In Culture Through Time, ed. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, 57-93. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Sahlins, Marshall. 1981. The Stranger King. The Journal of Pacific History 16(3): 107-132.

Scott, James C. 1985. Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Valeri, Valerio. 1990. "Constitutive History: Genealogy and Narrative in the Legitimation of Hawaiian Kingship." In Culture Through Time, ed. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, 154-192. Stanford: Stanford University Press.